The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter

1-7-2008

Appetites and Actions in Aristotle's Moral Psychology

Tom Olshewsky
University of Kentucky and Drexel University, tolshewsky@verizon.ne

Appetites and Actions in Aristotle's Moral Psychology

Tom Olshewsky, *University of Kentucky* and *Drexel University*

The recognition in recent decades of Aristotle's phenomenological modes of inquiry has challenged long-standing interpretations of "Aristotelian doctrine". One such case is the so-called practical syllogism[1], for which the conclusion is not a proposition, but an action. This has been a stumbling block to our treatment of the reason/appetite paradigm as the apparent source of human movement. What I hope to show here is that the paradigm is a false start for attempts to understand the psychology of animate motion in On the Soul III 9-11, at least as this has usually been understood. There, it serves Aristotle only as an appearance for the beginning of an inquiry into the origins of animate movement. Once properly understood, this account will lead us in turn to new understandings of the practical syllogism.

The beginning for our current inquiry must lie not in explorations about inferences from propositions, but rather in distinctions of dispositionalities. This is well articulated in Aristotle's own discriminations of rational from non-rational potentialities in *Metaphysics* IX-5:

> Regarding potentialities of the latter [non-rational potentialities], when the agent and the patient meet in the way appropriate to the potentiality in question, the one must act and the other be acted upon, but with the former [animate and rational], this is not necessary. For the latter are productive of one effect each, but the former are productive of opposing ones, so that they would produce contrary effects at the same time; but this is impossible. It is necessary, therefore, that the determination for this must be something else; I call this appetite (*ὀρεξιν*) or choice (*προαίρεσιν*). Which of the two [effects] it yearns for (*ὀρέγηθαι*) decisively, that it will do, whenever it is capable [of doing it] under the circumstances and it comes near to that which is capable of undergoing it. (1048a6-12)

Two striking features of this account of rational action are that the determinate authority for the action lies with *ὄρεξις* rather than *νοῦς*, and that *ὄρεξις* is here equated with *προαίρεσις*. I take the accounts of motives to action in *On the Soul* III: 10, 11, to be an exposition of the psychological conditions for just such a determination.

A third feature gives a base for my translation of '*ὄρεξις*' as 'appetite'. As Abraham Adel once noted, the etymology of the two terms is the virtually the same.[2] From the Latin, *ap-petitio* is to strive toward. The verb '*ὀρέγω*' basically meant to

---

[1] I say "so-called" here as a cautionary for our interpretation. Aristotle does not himself so call. But as Stan Smith pointed out to me in another discussion, Aristotle uses the term '*συλλογισμός*' much more widely and variably than our standard notions of a three-term categorical syllogism, more in its traditional idiom of collecting before the mind. It is important that we not begin at the outset with the presumption of an A-I-I form into which we attempt to fit what Aristotle has to say about the practical syllogism. This has been a flaw, I think, in much of the recent literature. In the time allotted, I cannot here engage critically with other worthy efforts to parse the significance by Martha Nussbaum, J.B. Skemp, Henry Richardson, David Charles, Steven Hudson, etc., but I remain critically conscious of their efforts.

[2] Abraham Edel, *Aristotle and His Philosophy*, Chapel Hill, 1982, p. 430, n. 14. He argues briefly and elegantly against current tendencies to translate '*ὄρεξις*' as 'desire' with interesting allusions to Eighteenth Century moral psychology.

stretch out or to stretch toward. It was used already in Aristotle's time by metaphoric extension to mean to yearn for. In Aristotle's hands, it receives further extension in his account of matter as by its very nature yearning for its form (*Physics* I, 192a18). Thus, his choice of '*ὄρεξις*' as his generic term for the appetitive links it to the dispositionality of the unfulfilled seeking its fulfillment, of a lack seeking an object. He can then in *On the Soul* III-9 classify *βούλησις* as a calculative appetite, *ἐπιθυμία* as a desiderative appetite, and *θυμός* as a passionate appetite, not according to their place in the soul, but according to their function in their stretching out toward fulfillment.

Aristotle lays out this classification as a base for answering his initial question in III-9 about what in the soul originates movement: Is it a single part of the soul? To this he can answer that he has elaborated faculties that are far more distinct than the traditional [platonic] parts, and that, if there were such parts, appetite would be in each, and it would be absurd to break this faculty into parts. Having thus dispatched the platonic model, and concluded that appetite cannot be analyzed in terms of parts or of other faculties, he returns to his original question: What does originate movement in the soul? While noetic functions (here including imagination) are inadequate to the role, since knowledge does not necessarily produce action, appetite also *evidently* falls short, since the self-controlled (*ἐγκρατής*) follow their *νοῦς* (sensibleness, purpose, apprehension) instead of their yearnings and desires. Thus, there *appear* to be two principles of motion for animate beings: *ὄρεξις* and *νοῦς*.

Were we to take this as the conclusion of the question of origins, it would be a misstep. As so often happens with such preliminary explorations, what we have been given are not conclusions, but *ἀπορία* of appearances, to be further explored.[3] In III-10, reasons are given for why the two *appear* to be the origins of motion (433a10-30), but this exposes calculation and imagination in subsidiary roles relative to appetite. It is the character of appetite to take an object – a yearning is a yearning *for* something. The relevant calculative role is the practical one whose end-in-view is the object of appetite. Key is the recognition that *βούλησις* is a form of *ὄρεξις* (433a25), thus subsuming practical reason as a function of appetite rather than as distinct from it. *Νοῦς* is always right (433a26), but *πρακτόν* can be otherwise (433a31). This leads us on to the *appearance* that the capacity in the soul that produces movement must be *ὄρεξις* (433a32).

Aristotle now seems to have resolved the issue, explaining opposing *ὄρεξεις* as arising between *βούλησις* and *ἐπιθυμία*,, both being appetite, when the former resists with a view to the future, while the latter only considers appetite in the present (433b5-10). But, just when he can conclude that it is the *ὀρεκτικόν* that originates motion in the soul, he must acknowledge that the *ὀρεκτόν*, which is the object of the yearning, must be first in originating movement. It moves the animal to yearning by being the object of thought or imagination, thus contributing to the origin of motion without itself being moved. The originators of motion prove to be plural after all. (433b10-12). Here Aristotle exposes a kind of dual dispositionality that he has already developed in his treatment of *αἴσθησις*. Both perception and appetite take an object. Just as the object of

[3] Compare, for instance, the beginnings of *Metaphysics* VII-3, where form, matter and the composite are preliminary candidates for substance, and by the end of the chapter, matter has been explicitly eliminated from the list (1029a28)

perception is the αἰσθητόν that activates the αἰσθητικόν, so the object of yearning is the ὀρεκτόν that activates the ὀρεκτικόν. Because it is the nature of both faculties of the soul to require an object, they each also require a dual dispositionality, that within the soul to become the activity and that without to undergo the activity. In both cases the disposition of the unmoved object to be acted up is a precondition of the activity.[4]

In perception, the αἰσθητικόν and the αἰσθητόν become one in the αἴσθησις. Where the dispositionalities of appetite differ from those of perception is in the two-stage character of their fulfillment. In the first stage, the actualization of the ὄρεξις itself arises from the linking of the two dispositions through the intermediaries of perception, imagination and thought. This is what makes νοῦς (now in the broadened sense to include imagination) a necessary component of the actualization of *ὀρέξις*. But this is still only the first stage of the moves to movement: It is the coming-to-be of the specific purpose-focused yearning. In an actualization that results in a *βούλησις*, deliberation produces a choice, which is a grasping for a particular *ὀρεκτόν* before another, thus specifying the specific *ὀρεκτικόν* that becomes activated. What makes for the possible adversity among *ὀρεκτικά* is the presence of multiple *ὀρεκτά* on any given occasion. Determination of which objective to act upon is a determination of which *potential* yearning is to become actual as the determinate yearning to be acted upon. Once that is determined, the actualized ὄρεξις produces the movement to its fulfillment, the second stage. It may be that deliberation takes place calculating the means to that fulfillment and even which objective is best under the circumstances, but this too is a part of the coming-to-be of the ὄρεξις for this movement. The actual appetite, the ὄρεξις is the result of the deliberative process, not its antecedent. The βούλευσις of deliberation produces the βούλησις of choice, and this προαίρεσις is the ὄρεξις . Once formulated, the ὄρεξις leads immediately to action. That which is moved moves in so far as it reaches after something, and the κίνεσις is the ὄρεξις in so far as it is the one that is ἐνέργεια (433b18).

Where Aristotle began in III-10 with expanding the notion of νοῦς to include imagination, he now in III-11 projects imagination across other faculties of sensation and calculation.[5] ὄρεξις, as actualization of the ὀρεκτικόν relative to ὀρεκτόν, is the source of motion, but it cannot become so without imagination to put the two dispositions into relation. For all animals that initiate movement, there must be at least some sort of sensory imagination, but only those with reasoning capacity have calculative imagination. It is this ability to trace implications for the future that enables the calculative to imagine alternative objectives of appetition. Because calculative imagination can consider multiple imagined objectives at the same time, it indeed has the *potential* for contrary effects, as noted in *Metaphysics* IX-5, which is why choice is necessary to determine the proper ὄρεξις for this place and time and circumstance.

While the calculative appetite may always pursue the apparently greater practical good, the disposition to the calculative appetite does not always give cause for the actual appetite. "Sometimes in the conflict among the imagined possible ὄρεξεις, that

---

[4] Here, I follow as a model Aryeh Kosman's treatment of perception in "Perceiving That We Perceive," Philosophical Review 84 (1975): 499-519.

[5] Hendrick Lorenz, *The Brute Within (Oxford, 2006), offers a detailed account of this expanding role of* φαντασία in the determination of appetite.

imagined appetite moves this one, as one celestial sphere moves another, appetite moving appetite, so that ἀκρασία comes into being." (434a13) Here Aristotle seeks in an analogy to the movement of the celestial spheres an account of how one envisioned objective, moving another, by virtue of that movement, may have its own course. This returns us to the problem of ἀκρασία, but it also leads us on to reflections about differences between the movements of the spheres and the coming to be of an ὄρεξις. "Always in nature, the more dominant also moves, in as much as already three motions are being moved. The capacity for knowing is not moved, but stands still." (434a15) What moves in the determination of an ὄρεξις are beliefs about such general knowledge as applied to that determination. "Since on the one hand, there is the assumption and account according to the whole, but on the other, that according to each situation (for one assumption tells that there is need in such a situation to achieve such as this, and another tells that such a situation is now, and that I am the one to achieve it), it appears that it is this opinion that moves, not that according to the whole." (434a20) The point here is that our knowledge of the general does not change, only our application to a particular situation in which a particular need is discerned.

This is not a prototype for a practical syllogism, with the first premise stating a general truth and a second an application of that truth. For such an analysis to work, one would need to build into the first premise some presumptions about a generalization placing some value on a need fulfillment, with the second asserting that this situation is a circumstance under which such fulfillment can be enacted. A more accurate reading, I think, is that Aristotle is here still sorting out the roles of νοῦς and ὄρεξις in the origins of movement. The role of knowledge is to stand still, and the dual applications of knowledge as beliefs relevant to each situation, both that there is a need in this situation to pursue some longing and that I am in a circumstance for pursuing such an objective successfully. Both the appraisal of the appetitive disposition (the ὀρεκτικόν) and the appraisal of its objective in this situation (the ὀρεκτόν) are conditions on coming to the determination of what I actually want here and now (the ὄρεξις), but in deliberation for action, those dispositions to appetite must be informed by knowledge. What is variable and subject to change is not the knowledge itself, but the ways in which one applies it in an individual situation.

At least two points in our analysis here tell against traditional interpretations. First is recognition that the determination of the relevant ὄρεξις as a product of deliberation, not its antecedent. It is the activation of the ὀρεκτικόν relative to the ὀρεκτόν that produces the ὄρεξις. For an ἐπιθυμία, all that is needed is for the perceptual imagination to present the organism with an object that correlates to its need. For a βούλησις, a calculation is required that determines which imagined objective best fulfills the needs of the organism. This calculation opens the way for one need to move another, so the βούλησις as determined often will be a product of one potential ὄρεξις competing with another. It may itself be swayed by the very competing forces it attempts to resolve. How this comes about Aristotle does not spell out here, He only notes that such deliberation does not alter our knowledge; only the beliefs regarding this situation are altered. Second, it is the potential reaching out toward its potential objective that produces the ὄρεξις. Deliberation aids in determining the right appetitive disposition relative to the right dispositional objective in this situation.

Some have sought an account of that deliberative process on the model of the so-called practical syllogism that has suggested itself in *On the Motion of Animals* 7. Here, Aristotle but draws an analogy between arriving at a conclusion in scientific inquiry and coming to a motion. His aim here is to show why noetic activity (imagination or thought) sometimes results in motion, sometimes not. For scientific inferencing, the reckoning up (συλλογιζομένος) from the two propositions put forward (ἐκ τῶν δύο προτάσεων) yields a truth, but in matters of motion, the antecedents stretch forward to an action. What determines the results are not the verities of nature, but the bringing together the good and the possible. He accents that the good in question is not some sort of ultimate good, but a good in view, an object of appetite (ὀρεκτόν) and an object of intention (διανοητόν) having to do with the aim of action (700b23-25).

Here we have very much a recapitulation of the account we already found in *On the Soul* III-11. If one were to conceive that all men must walk [under such and such circumstances] and that he is a man, then he must walk. If one were to conceive the opposite, then he must remain at rest. The *must* (the subjunctive -τεόν) here has the force not of moral obligation, but of a practical necessity, based on the already determined end in view relevant to a need at hand that brings together the good and the possible. In the case considered, the must is generated by an already actualized appetite. The minor premise falls out enthymematically, Once it has been determined what is good for man in general, one need not reflect about his own humanity (701a25-29). The result is a direct move from a single *protasis* to an action[6]. "Face to face with the inquiring *noetics* [perception, imagination, thought], the actuality of the appetite comes to be. I want to drink, says ἐπιθυμία; this is drink, says perception, imagination or thought. Immediately, I drink. In this way, animals start to move and act. The uttermost cause of motion is appetite, arising after perception, or after imagination or thought." (701a30-37) Because appetite is the bridge from circumstantial observations to action by putting together the want (ὀρεκτικόν) with its object (ὀρεκτόν), Aristotle castes it as a cause and middle term in the definition of movement because it makes this bridge (703a5). The explorations in analogy to syllogistic here have not to do, however, with the arrival at decision to act through the course of deliberation since they clearly concern the direct move from the already actualized appetite to action.

Aristotle's account of deliberation and choice in *Ethica Nicomachea* also follows on the dispositional account of coming to be of an ὄρεξις in *On the Soul*. "When the deliberative choice is the objective of appetite for us, the choice of this would also be the devisable appetite for us, for from that which was deliberated, that is stretched toward the object according to the deliberation." (1113a10) The coming to be of the βούλησις is the product of the βούλευσις, and as an actualized ὄρεξις it already stretches out toward its determined object to be achieved. "We might say, on the one hand, that the objective according to true judgment is good in an unqualified sense, but, on the other, in a particular circumstance the objective will be whatever appears to be good; that which is true judgment for the diligent, chance for the frivolous." (1143a23-26). So just because

[6] The instance considered with multiple conditions (701a18-24) may well be treated on analogy to a sorites. The need is for warmth; the covering is the object to satisfy that need, which leads to the coat as the object to satisfy that need. The need for a coat leads then to the objective of making that coat. So the action immediately undertaken is for the objective of bring into being the objective to satisfy the immediate need.

the aim is for achieving what is best, one can make bad judgments about what is best in this place and time. No one seeks only the apparent good, but whatever appears to be good to the person will often appear to be good without qualification in this circumstance. The one who deliberates with diligence will seek true judgment, but the frivolous will take whatever chances to be his resolve. The judgment is not about what is unqualifiedly good, but about what under the circumstances is most needed, and thus what will be the best appetite to initiate what action to what goal.

The one place in the entire extant Aristotelian corpus that comes close to speaking directly of a practical syllogism is in the context of fathoming practical wisdom in EN VI-12: "For the conclusions drawn about practical things are those having a beginning, since the end and the best is such, whatever it may be (for the sake of discussion, let it be whatever it happens to be)." οἱ γὰρ συλλογισμοὶ τῶν πρακτῶν ἀρχὴν ἔχοντές εἰσιν, ἐπειδὴ τοιόνδε τὸ τέλος καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, ὁτιδήποτε ὄν (ἔστω γὰρ λόγου χάριν τὸ τυχόν) (1144a31-34). The point being made is that this starting point will be evident to the good man, but wickedness may pervert us into being deceived about the starting point. The reference is not to a "practical syllogism", *per se*, but to conclusions drawn about practical things. The focus is on the end in view, discerned correctly as the best by the good man, but distorted by those wanting in goodness. This discernment of the best end in view is a matter of practical experience, not of deductive inference, and experienced people have an eye for it. This again is the starting point for motion, the ὀρεκτόν that answers to the needs of the ὀρεκτικόν.

The point that Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes in his accounts of deliberation is that the relevant general is derivative from the individual circumstances relative to felt needs. This is not a deductively reasoned starting point for determining action. Nor is it some induction from an instance to a universal generalization, but rather a linking of a specific appetitive disposition to a general objective that warrants the actualized ὄρεξις. If, to use his example (1147a25-b5), you observe in a situation a sweet, and you have the general belief that all sweets are desirable to eat, considered without any qualification by other considerations, you will, if able and not restrained, eat the sweet. But if, in the same situation, you also have, for whatever circumstantial reasons (it will spoil your supper, ruin your diet, rot your teeth, etc.), the conviction that sweets under these circumstances are to be avoided, you may then have those contrary appetitive dispositions about which Aristotle spoke in the *Metaphysics* and in the *Psychology*. Both computations are correct, and each by itself would lead to action relative to the situation (one to eating, the other to refraining), but they cannot both be enacted, so it cannot be that both appetitive dispositions will become actual appetites for this person in this place and time. The diligent and disciplined deliberator will on this occasion avoid the sweet (on some other occasion, she might happily indulge that appetite). The frivolous will ignore or rationalize the constraining considerations in order to pursue the desiderative appetite here and now. The logic of the matter is not failure of knowing what is right, ἁπλος, since each general is correct in abstraction, but, as a calculation to choice, under these circumstances, it is the one that serves the well-being of the actor in the long run, not just the desire in the immediate, and that produces the appropriate appetite to act upon.

So the deliberative process is not so much a proper inference from principle and circumstance to a proposed action (which still leaves puzzling how the conclusion itself is an action) as it is picking the right objective to enact on this occasion. That enacting is

the actualization of an ὄρεξις in a choice that directly leads to the movement necessary to achieve its objective. The role of νοῦς in grasping the right ὀρεκτόν is the determination of which of the competing ὀρεκτικόν is best fulfilled in this situation for the well-being of the organism; but this, as Aristotle notes, is not a theoretical enterprise, but one that depends upon disciplined habituation of dispositions. For the ἀκρατής, the problem is not so much a lack of knowledge, but a lack of discipline in applying what she knows. This is a matter of dispositionalities, not of rational inferences.

We can imagine competing spheres of appetite for the *akrasic*. Perceptive imagination says "There's a sweet." *Epithumia*$_1$ (desiderative appetite) *would* say "Sweets are pleasant," and she *would* straight away eat it. But *bouleusis*$_1$ (toward a calculative appetite) *would* say, "Sweets will spoil your diet, and you will gain more weight. What you really need now is exercise, which will blunt your desire for the sweet and contribute to reducing weight." But, *bouleusis*$_2$ (toward boulesis$_2$) would say, "A cup of coffee is also pleasant, will slake my desire for the sweet, and drinking it will be a lot easier than doing exercises right now." Then perceptive *phantasia* (leading to *epithumia*$_2$) would say, "I used to enjoy a smoke with a cup of coffee - before I quit - and they really are pleasant together (and *bouleusis*$_3$ would add that a smoke would also help slake my desire for the sweet)." So, what's an *akrasic* to do here and now, but light up! It's not that she doesn't *know* the implications of her action. In all of this whirl of *orectic* spheres, what *nous* knows remains unmoved. There is nothing defective in the logic of the reflections, but even the deliberations that would lead to boulesis$_2$ (which the person of practical wisdom might well observe is only a second best) open the way for a new sphere of desiderative appetite that leads to breaking a good habit in an effort to avoid an immediate urge. The conflicting dispositions are deliberatively resolved into an appetite that once chosen leads directly to action, but only an apparent good, not the best for her well being. Clearly she knows all of the knowledge involved in these deliberations, but does not apply it in a practical way that will foster her best interests in the long run. In the whirl of the spheres of *orexis,* she has lost sight of that good, like a person drunk or asleep[7].

This account of ἀκρασία not only shows how one can know the good and not do the good. It exemplifies how deliberation is a matter of matching up an objective for action with the current needs of the organism. This is not a process of deductive inference from a general moral truth applied to a particular circumstance, but a matter of joining dual dispositions in the actualized appetite that then leads directly to action.

[7] One might find a similar example in *Oklahoma's* Ado Annie: "I'm just a girl who can't say no," [even though] "I've known what's right from wrong since I was ten," [but]"when I'm with a feller, I forget." She even cites the Golden Rule as a rationale for obligation to kiss him back.